Case Study: The Garden Cinema, London

Family Programming

About the Programme:

The Garden Cinema is an independent cinema based in Central London. Opened in 2022 its programme features new releases alongside curated repertory seasons.

It has an increasingly popular family programme that serves the local community featuring classic family films screened at the weekend and during school holidays.

Age-range:

The family programme broadly reaches children aged 5 to 11 years depending on the film selected.

Pricing:

The screenings are Pay What You Can (the lowest band starts at £3) and there is an allocation of subsidised free tickets for each screening that you can request via email.

Screening Schedule:

Family films are hosted every Saturday & Sunday morning (usually 11am) and on weekdays during the school holidays. On Sundays the films are followed by free fun and creative activities for children that are themed around the film.

Additional Activity:

Sunday craft activities have included decorating cat masks for Flow, making dinosaurs for The Land Before Time and designing your dream chocolate bar for Wonka.

Other popular activities have been a Finding Nemo treasure hunt, making paper planes for Planes and Storyboarding for Toy Story.

Popular Screenings

The programme is made up of family classics, with the most popular being nostalgic titles that parents want to introduce to their children such as Bugsy Malone, The Wizard of Oz or Monsieur Hulot's Holiday.

The cinema also regularly collaborates with the London International Animation Festival (LIAF) who provide new animated shorts and features which are particularly engaging for younger children.

Special Events:

Events in collaboration with other organisations are the most successful as they provide lesser seen and unusual titles and help to widen audience reach and marketing opportunities for the cinema. The most popular screenings have been:

- Babe and Charlotte's Webb with miniature pigs where the audience had the opportunity to feed and pet the animals after the screening courtesy of Kew Little Pigs Farm.

- A Halloween screening of Monsters Inc alongside a local trick or treat trail. Families attended in costume to watch Monsters Inc before they set off on the trail.

- Kensuke's Kingdom Director Q&A hosted by London Breeze Film Festival.

Creating the right environment:

The family films tend to be the only screenings in the cinema on a weekend morning which creates a relaxed environment. There are no trailers, instead the cinema projects a slide with upcoming films and there is always an introduction from the same staff member who has built up a rapport with the families attending.

Booster seats are available for younger children and although popcorn isn't usually available in the cinema, they do provide bags specifically for the family screenings at £1.75.

The post screening activity is hosted in a large open-plan bar which means children can spread out.

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Marketing insights:

The cinema has a dedicated page for the Family programme which is also included in the weekly newsletter and on socials.

Every two months they create a new slide for the Family Programme screenings and a trailer package with the upcoming family films to play before the other programmed films.

They print a flyer which is displayed at the box office and distributed around local schools, community centres, youth clubs and library.

The cinema also has a database of schools and local organisations that they reach out to be included in their newsletters.

Each year they also host the Into Film Festival which they find is a great way to connect with schools across London.

Main challenges:

As a new cinema they had to build their family audience from scratch which was a slow process. Despite being in a very residential area they needed to make local families feel like the cinema was a space for them.

The Family Programmer did a lot of outreach which involved flyering parents at school pick up, and offering free tickets to local youth clubs and schools.

The Pay What You Can pricing for family screenings has been a successful way of encouraging a more diverse audience however, in its first year, customers could simply book the free tickets online which meant some took advantage of the offer.

It was later changed so that you have to email or phone up to request free tickets. This has meant that they are now getting into the right hands.

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Biggest success:

The Pay What You Can Pricing model has been the most valuable in making the family screenings accessible to everyone. This was a model inspired by the Hyde Park Picture House in Leeds where the Family Programmer previously worked.

“I’m also proud of the range of films we screen, and that parents can bond with their children over nostalgic titles from their own childhood. It’s been lovely introducing children to classic films and obscure titles that they might not necessarily see on streaming platforms such as Monsieur Hulot's Holiday, Journey to the Beginning of Time, Village Rockstars and The King and the Mockingbird.

Film is a fantastic educational tool for learning about the world, improving literacy and critical thinking. Hopefully we might also be inspiring the next generation of filmmakers, writers, actors and cinephiles.”

- Molly Cowderoy, Programmer

Contact:

For more information about the Family Programme at the Garden Cinema contact Molly Cowderoy on molly@thegardencinema.co.uk

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